DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 436 PS 021 881

AUTHOR Gayle-Evans, Guda
TITLE Making Cultural Connections for African American Children under Six: Affirming Culture through Literature and the Arts.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Southern Association on Children under Six (44th, Biloxi, MS, March 25-27, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; Black Attitudes; Black Culture; *Black Literature; *Black Youth; Childrens Literature; Classroom Environment; *Classroom Techniques; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Opportunities; Educational Strategies; Minority Groups; Multicultural Education; Parent Role; Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Student Alienation; Subcultures; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans

ABSTRACT

The school system in the United States was established as, and remains, an expression of the white, middle-class values dominant in the society. The "melting pot" theory, with its emphasis on assimilation and the reduction of differences has been held by many for a long time. In the schools, however, this emphasis tends to cause feelings of alienation among children from lower socioeconomic groups and ethnic minorities, especially African-Americans. Affirmation of African-American and other non-mainstream cultures in the classroom, therefore, is imperative for the survival of a sense of self among students. African-American culture can be affirmed for students through exposing them to literature by and about black people, discussing African-American history and cultural heroes, and explaining cultural holidays and celebrations, such as Kwaanza. Other activities can include field trips to museums reflecting African-American culture, classroom visits by authors or poets, or writing letters to prominent authors. In this process it is important that teachers function as partners, be willing to discuss racial or ethnic issues, allow children freedom of linguistic expression while they negotiate language, and maintain activity centers in the classroom that reflect elements of African-American culture. Teachers should also actively involve parents by inviting them to visit the classroom to talk to the children about their heritage and by presenting them as role models for children, thus helping instill the message that being a minority in the United States is not synonymous with being a failure. (BCY)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Guda G. Gayle-Evans
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED 363 436

PS 021881

Guda Gayle-Evans

Making Cultural Connections for African American Children Under Six: Affirming Culture Through Literature and the Arts.

Definition: What is Culture?

According to Chinoy and Hewitt (1975), culture is the way people think, feel and behave in a society. It is a "blueprint" for behavior.

How do we become a part of a culture?

Contrary to what many people seem to believe, we are not born with a culture. We are born into a culture and we become socialized into that particular culture. Through interactions and sharing with the primary caregiver and others who share the culture we learn the requirements of the culture, for example, dress, language and behavior. Chinoy and Hewitt indicate that there are four main socializing agents (pg. 103). Through these agents we usually learn what is acceptable in the particular society. Caregivers are usually the primary socializing agent with the media being the fourth. However, with children spending so many hours in front of the television, TV is fast becoming the "primary caregiver" for many of these children. Chinoy and Hewitt further stated that:

> "The importance of culture lies in the fact it provides the knowledge and the techniques that enable humans to survive both physically and socially, and to control in varying degrees the world around them" (pg. 37).

Within any one culture there are several micro cultures to which an individual belongs. These microcultures include religious groups, social clubs and schools. Religion is very prominent within the African-American culture. Many entertainers, especially singers, indicate that their beginning comes from singing in their church which has been a very positive influence in their lives and remains a strong force in the African-American culture.

School, on the other hand, is not usually as positive. The school was set up and still remains a system of White middle-class values. Because of this structure of the school system, many children from lower socioeconomic groups, as well as many minorities including African-American children, tend to feel alienated. According to Carnine, Carnine, Karp & Weisberg (1988), many children enter school full of enthusiasm but by the time they are sixteen years old they become negative and even resentful

towards education. Carnine, et al further indicate that this event is more evident among low income children many of whom are black. The hidden curriculum is no secret among educators and because the curriculum contains predominantly middle-class values, many of these children cannot fit in and ultimately lose interest and drop out.

One can hardly discuss culture without discussing the aspect of assimilation. The "Melting Pot Theory," a theory of assimilation, has been held by many for a very long time. It was felt that everyone should become "American." The idea was to reduce differences and have everyone belong to the same religion as well as learning the same things in school. According to Banks (1975), assimilationist theory held that "....strong ethnic attachments are dysfunctional within a modernized democratic state" (pg. 171).

But assimilation is hardly possible where there is alienation. People need to have a sense of belonging, and rejection especially by the dominant group, will ultimately lead to the development of a subculture. In the case of the United States, rejection by the dominant group has led to the emergence of, and strong attachment within the various ethnic and cultural groups.

Why is there a need for affirmation of culture?

In a society that is not culturally homogeneous, one is left to strive for either what has been defined as a "melting Pot" type of society or a pluralistic "mosaic" type society. In the "Melting Pot" phenomenon, everyone is expected to merge as one. In a pluralistic society, on the other hand, different cultural groups are urged to maintain their cultural identity while remaining a part of the dominant culture. In the United States the verbalization of the "Melting Pot" concept along with the alienation of non mainstream culture has led various ethnic groups toward stabilizing their individual ethnic identities. What was initially seen as secondary - ethnic and cultural identity - has now become the primary focus. Emphasis is now, more than ever, on the maintenance of cultural and ethnic identity while still being American.

It is no accident that schools mirror society. It was set up that way (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Katz, 1968; Spring, 1986). According to Katz (1968), "standardization" in the common schools was a way if protecting middle-class Protestant values. The influx of immigrants was creating a diversity which was considered a threat to the White Anglo Saxon Protestant values. This protection of White middle-class values exists in our schools even today. With the upheaval of the sixties some attempt has been to made to include changes in the curriculum. This was to appease the Civil Rights Movement. However, changes cannot be made on a superficial level. These changes have to be made "top down." Change and the

acceptance of pluralism have to be made on an institutionalized level. At present, in the United States, this type of change is not feasible. The dominant group is unwilling to relegate power to any other group. This, perhaps, is for fear of losing control.

African-Americans make up approximately 13% of the population of the United States. African American children, therefore, do need affirmation of their culture especially in a society that is still not very accepting of differences, especially racial differences.

According to Bennett (1990):

> "In a pluralistic society members of ethnic minority groups are permitted to retain many of their cultural ways as long as they conform to these practices deemed necessary for harmonious co existence within the society as a whole" (pg. 11).

Each group is allowed to maintain its identity while making allowance for the fact that the group is only a part of the whole. It is a functional "family-Type" structure. However, this is only when pluralism is the acknowledged societal norm and this is not yet true in the United States.

How can we help African American Children Affirm Culture?

Affirming culture is not usually difficult if the society is relatively homogeneous. In the case of the United States, however, the society is technically pluralistic but remains in conflict with the "melting pot" philosophy. Affirmation of culture other than that of the WASP/Eurocentric one, is imperative for the survival of a sense of self within the various minority groups. In the book <u>All Us Come Cross the Water</u> (Clifton, 1973), a little boy is angered because the teacher not only refers to him by his non African name but also points out that his heritage is African rather than indicating a country of his origin. He goes to find Tweezer, " .. a grown man friend over to The Panther Bookshop." He knows that Africa is a continent made up of many countries and is determined to find out his exact heritage. They talk and Tweezer assures him that: "All us come cross the water. We one people Ujaama." Next day he alleviates his teacher's fears that he is ashamed of his heritage when he and his friends proudly stand up in the class when asked. Through Ujaama we learn that children do become curious about who they are and from whence they came.

Affirming Culture Through the Children's Literature:

It is important that we expose children to many books through which they can learn how other people, including other Black people, think, feel, behave, dress; the kinds of foods they eat and the kinds of clothes they wear. Children also become familiar with the attributes of different, yet strong family ties. For example,

Village of Round and Square Houses (Grifalconi, 1986) is about a family in the Village of Tos in the Cameroons. The rôle of the different members of the family is clearly defined. There is respect not only for age (including children) but also for gender. Rehema's Journey: A Visit in Tanzania (Margolis, 1990), describes the life of a little girl's family. Through this book children see some comparison with the United States as well as learn about the culture of Tanzania. For family relationships in the United States African American books should be included. Books such as Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991) and Just Us Women (Caines, 1982), expose children to intergenerational relationships. Erikson (1950), in his stage of generativity vs. stagnation, urged the interaction of older adults with children. Close intergenerational relationships has been and should remain one of the hallmarks of the African-American family.

When we expose children to books that are culturally relevant we help them learn what is appropriate or inappropriate within and even outside of their culture. African-American children do need books that reflect their life-style and heritage to reinforce the positive aspects of being Black.

It is hardly possible to affirm African-American culture without including history so that people learn about themselves past and present. In learning history, African American children get a chance to learn about the people who made contributions to their culture.

Some of the heroes children can learn about are, for example, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman and Marcus Garvey. The presentation for young children can be in simple form without being simplistic. Many autobiographies and biographies are available about prominent Africans and African-Americans as well as events that marked the history as a people. Books about Slavery and the South are available for young readers. Flossie and the Fox (McKissack, 1986) and Follow the Drinking Gourd are only two of many such examples.

Through books African-American children learn about African-American cultural holidays, for example, Kwaanza and what it means to them as a people. The book Kwaanza, (Porter, 1991) describes the African-American holiday, its meaning and the meaning of the Swahili words used in the celebration. However, with regard to heroes and holidays, teachers should not focus on just the ethnic heroes but African Americans as a group (Banks, 1990). With regard to holidays, Walsh (1980), admonishes us about their proper presentation. Walsh suggests:

> "Holiday celebrations are important happenings in the life of the young child.... Given the festive nature of the occasions with the emphasis on having a good time, it is all too easy for the child to miss learning some of the deeper meanings of the special days we celebrate."

There is a tendency, even today, to present Africa very negatively. African American children need to come to know countries in Africa not as primitive and distant -- "the Dark Continent" but as a viable part of their history and a place with which to identify. They need books that deal with life in Africa in earlier times as well as in the Twentieth Century. A book such as Not So Fast Songololo (Daly, 1985) is a way of helping children see the similarities between city life in the United States and South Africa. Through books like these, children can see that we share many similarities even though we are different.

Books written by and about African Americans should also be included. Poetry books by Nikki Giovanni and books by Lucille Clifton as well as books by Ezra Jack Keats are just some of the many examples. African American children need to see themselves in books in a positive way. Books with illustrations by Tom and Muriel Feelings, Ann Grifalconi and Caroline Binch are just a few of the many books that depict Blacks in a realistic positive way. Magazines such as Ebony and Essence should also be included so children can see African Americans as a progressive people. But this does not mean we should exclude mainstream books. They need to learn about "macro" culture as well. The burden of a pluralistic society such as the United States is that those from minority groups have to successfully function in at least two cultures in order to survive.

Teachers as Partners:

It is important that teachers feel comfortable about dealing with racial, ethnic and cultural issues. If books contain stereotypes then teachers need to discuss them so children can learn the facts. The classroom should provide a safe and positive environment for these types of interactions. Teachers who discuss these issues are saying to children that culture is important and must be presented accurately. Children from these groups will also be assured that they are being respected as persons. For this reason, it is especially important that the classroom structure represents ethnic, cultural and racial diversity. This says to children that no one group is valued over the other.

One area in which there is much discrepancy is the area of language. Many times we kill children's creativity because we suppress freedom of expression. We need to accept the language the child brings to the classroom. Allow children to use invented spelling and Black English while they negotiate language (Nathenson-Mejia, 1989; Delpit, 1988; Winsboro & Solomon, 1990). Free expression should be the priority. Focus on the process and then deal with the product, the mechanisms of writing, during conferencing. Children can only give what they have and if what they have is Black English then we need to accept that. Dewey admonished us to accept the experiences the child brings to the classroom and then take him from there by building on the

experiences that he brings. This is especially important in the early childhood classroom. Encourage children to write about their experiences without being judgmental. Experiences of African-American children, especially if they are from the inner city, will be different from that of most teachers. But there is no need for us to undermine their experience. Accept what they bring as long as it is legal.

Other Experiences:

To provide children with other experiences that will help to affirm culture, the following activities may be helpful.

1. Take the children on field trips to art galleries and museums that reflect African-American culture.
2. Invite African-American authors, artists and poets to your classroom.
3. Have the children write letters to their favorite African-American author, poet and illustrator.
4. Do book/author study of African American author/poet.

Cooking:

Cooking is a great way to affirm/reinforce cultural heritage. Children can find recipes from their cultural heritage, for example, fou fou, sweet potato pie or pudding, fried bananas or plantains and boiled yams. Cooking can also be extended across the curriculum. When cooking, include curriculum areas such as science, math, language arts and social studies. Make drinks in the classroom that are culture-specific, for example, carrot juice and beet juice are only two such examples. Children will be exposed to foods that relate to African culture as well as having good eating habits reinforced. Make journey cakes in your classroom. It is a simple recipe and this is also a good time to explain its history.

To develop social skills while exposing children to their heritage-- teach them to use a knife and fork (together). Also, this is a good time to have them eat with their fingers, for example, eating fou fou. This provides tactile experience and exposes them to how people in some African cultures eat (Village of Round and Square Houses).

The Classroom:

Early childhood classrooms should contain activity centers. The house keeping center is a gold mine for reinforcing cultural heritage. In the house-keeping center the teacher should include clothing that is representative of African-American culture. Such items include caftans, dashiki, gele (headkerchief) and kente cloth. Also, instead of always having a bed the teacher should

alternate with a small hammock. Include necklaces and bracelets of wood and beads representative of African-American culture. The beauty shop should include different textured hair as well as empty bottles and jars with the labels for various African-American hair products. In the block center add community helpers that include African-Americans. The fireperson and doctor, for example, could both be black.

Expose children to African musical instruments and dances. The children could also dress in clothing used by the various African countries during these dances. In art, make sure that the colors black and brown are included in the art center and for easel painting. There should also be a supply of skin-tone paints that include various skin-tones for African-Americans. Fine motor activities should include beading and the making of jewelry, mask making and batik.

Include artifacts related to African-American culture. For example, carvings, straw and claywork should also be included in the classroom. Pictures and posters depicting African-American heritage should be included in every classroom. These items are especially important if the African-American child is a minority in the classroom. This says to the child that even though he may be a minority in his classroom, there are many others like him, aside from his friends and family, who share his culture. This kind of affirmation is especially important for young children.

Parents as Partners:

According to Comer (1991) many parents are victims of racism and, therefore, feel inadequate in preparing their children to deal with racism. But parents can help children affirm their culture and should do so as effectively as possible. However, to begin, these parents need to feel positive about their culture. They need to do more than just verbalize that "Black is Beautiful". They must help children internalize and feel beautiful as Black children.

Parents need to help children accept physical features -- skin color, hair type, and facial features as unique and a part of Black identity. Children need to learn that these differences, even if they are seen negatively by others, are not things for which they should feel ashamed. Parents and teachers need to explain melanin to children. These children need to be exposed to books that deal positively with "cornrows", skin color and other features of being Black. Bright Eyes Brown Skin (Hudson & Ford, 1990), is a book for young children. This book deals positively with racial features while the young children involved display the normalcy of childhood. Something else which children need to understand is the importance of being able to function in a dual society. They have to function in two cultures and yet maintain a positive identity. But they also need to learn that they need not give up one part of their identity in lieu of the other. They are Africans and

Americans because of their history and not despite it.

Role Models:

One of the many problems young African-American children may face is that many of them may not always have positive role models. Parents need to learn to show interest in their children's education. They need to remember to ask the children about school. Parents need to keep in close contact with teachers and not be intimidated by them. Parents need to check on the schools and find out what their children are being taught. Parents also need to keep in close contact with their child's school to ensure that representation of African-Americans is more than an appendage to the curriculum and also that all inclusion is factual.

Teachers also have an obligation to help children affirm culture. If the teacher is not African-American it may be difficult but this does not negate his or her responsibility. It just means that these teachers will have to work harder. For children to feel good about themselves they need to have a sense of who they are and they can hardly do so if they do not feel positive about their heritage. If they are made to feel inadequate or if they are not represented in the classroom, one can hardly expect them to have a strong sense of self especially in the classroom.

To further help African-American children affirm their culture teachers need to also do the following:

1. Invite parents and relatives of African-American children or African-Americans from the community to come to the classroom and talk to the children about their heritage.

2. Include African-American parents as partners in classroom activities. If they cannot come to the school then they can help by making things at home.

3. Have African American grandmothers and/or teacher's aide come to the classroom to work with the children.

In the meantime, parents must commit to helping their children with their assignments and also work with them at home. They also must commit to spending quality time with children by reading to them. Teachers, on the other hand, must provide children with materials and activities that are culturally relevant. No one can do it alone but acceptance of African-American culture by African-Americans as well as non African-Americans is imperative if we are going to change the cycle of some of the social problems which are a direct offshoot of the lack of acceptance and affirmation.

Children need to learn that being a minority in the United States is not synonymous with failure. As members of a minority in the United States, children may need to work much harder to assert themselves. Parents and teachers will need to make a greater effort to help these children build strong self-esteem. African-

Guda Gayle-Evans

American children need to realize and internalize that success in school is not a choice. As a people, during these times, it has to be taken as a mandate.

Bibliography

Banks, J. A. (1975). The implication of ethnicity for curriculum reform. Educational Leadership, Vol. 33(3), 168-172.

Banks, J. A. (1990). Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform. Social Studies Texan, Vol. 5(3), 43-45.

Bennett, C. (1990). Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory Into Practice, Second Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). Schooling in Capitalist America. New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers.

Carnine, D., Carnine. L., Karp, J., & Weisberg, P. (1988). Kindergarten for Economically Disadvantaged Children: The Direct Instruction Component. In C. Warger (Ed.) A Resource Guide to Public School Early Childhood Programs. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Chinoy, E. & Hewitt, J. (1975). Sociological Perspective. New York: Random House.

Comer, J. (1990). Racism and the Education of Young Children. Teachers College Record, Vol. 90(3), 352-361.

Delpit, L. (1988). The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children. Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 58(3), 280-98.

Harris, V. J. (1991). Multicultural Curriculum: African American Children's Literature. Young Children, Vol. 46(2), 37-44.

Katz, M. (1968). The Irony of Early School Reform. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Nathenson-Mejia, S. (1989). Writing in a Second language: Negotiating Meaning Through Invented Spelling. Language Arts, Vol. 66(5), 516-26.

Spring, J. (1986). The American School 1642-1985. New York: Longman.

Walsh, H. (1980). Introducing the Young Child to the Social World. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.

Winsboro, B. & Solomon, I. (Dec. 1990). Standard English vs. "The American Dream." Education Digest, pp. 51-52.